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Of Bats and Bodies: Methods for Reading and Writing Embodiment

Contact:

Author name: Synne L. Dyvik

Affiliation: University of Sussex

Address: Department of International Relations, School of Global Studies. Arts C, Arts Road, University of Sussex, Falmer BN1 9SJ, Brighton.

Phone: 01273 877778

Email: s.laastad-dyvik@sussex.ac.uk

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Abstract

Military memoirs are embodied texts of war. They therefore pose particular challenges to scholars who work with them, as they seem to insist on the uniqueness of particular wartime experiences and the impossibility of communicating these embodied experiences to a wider public. In this article I unpack some of the tensions in the ways that war scholarship approaches these ‘flesh-witness accounts’ (Harari, 2008; 2009) and argue that these can productively be challenged, in ways that open up new possibilities for research methods.

I begin by explaining what is meant by ‘flesh-witnessing’ and the significance of corporeal experience in constructing particular stories about war. From this I argue that while placing significance on embodiment when studying war is crucial, embodiment is not a concept that should be assigned to others ‘over there’, without also acknowledging how it affects ‘us’ ‘back home’ as civilians and scholars. Rather, embodiment as a concept compels us to analyse its numerous ‘entanglements’ (Mensch, 2009), which in turn challenge us to rethink the relationship between the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’ of military memoirs. Reflecting on my own work with these memoirs, and learning to pay attention to what I do and feel as I read and write, I chart a series of methods for *reading and writing embodiment*.

Key words: embodiment; experience; methods; and military memoirs.

Introduction

It is increasingly being recognised within ‘critical war studies’ and ‘critical military studies’ that humans, with all their variable compositions, emotions, and experiences should be central when studying war and militarism (Sylvester, 2013; Parashar, 2013; McSorley, 2013; Åhäll and Gregory, 2015; Wilcox, 2015; also see articles in this issue). This not only does important political work in opposing a disembodied and disconnected analysis of war, but centralising human experiences, embodiment and corporeality can also help us analyse more fully how war is ‘generative’ of far more than states, borders and particular policies (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011; Brighton, 2011; Dyvik, 2016). This Special Issue extends this call to the level of the researcher and invites us to reflect on our own situatedness in relation to the spaces, subjects and phenomena studied and to try to tease out the range of embodiments these hold.

My way into accessing the human experience of war is in part through reading military memoirs, and I have used these to study the various gendered performances that underpin the counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan (Dyvik, Forthcoming; 2016). However, in this endeavour I, and likely others who work with written testimonies and narratives of wars, are continuously faced with a series of challenges. Translating human experience and emotion into text in the first place and subsequently using these texts to analyse the embodiment of war is riddled with difficulties (Baker, this issue). What is lost along the way? In what ways can we do this? In short, how does one read and write embodiment? In what follows, I explore my own approach to these questions through unpacking how I’ve learned to pay attention to the unconscious embodied actions and emotions I have found myself doing and having while reading and writing.

Military memoirs have been and continue to be an important contributor to our imaginaries about war (Woodward and Jenkins, 2013; Duncanson, 2013). They can challenge, confirm, refocus and reorient public ideas about what war means and what it does (Woodward and Jenkins, 2012b; Dyvik, 2016). War stories have always had the capacity to do this, but within the genre of ‘war literature’ military memoirs occupy a particular space. In the UK alone military memoirs have an estimated market value of around five million pounds, and in the US they frequently appear on ‘best seller’ lists (Woodward and Jenkins, 2012b; see also Bosman, 2012; NPR, 2014). In addition to their popularity, they are set apart through their claim to ‘truth’, which often affords them a ‘privileged authority’ over the meanings of war

and how it should be interpreted in the public sphere (Harari, 2008: 7; Scranton, 2015). While military memoirs are diverse, some spanning a whole career whereas others only focus on one operation in detail, they can be understood to belong to a 'genre' in its own right. However, to what extent this influences the ways in which its authors approach their writing, whether consciously or unconsciously, varies a great deal (for analysis see Jenkins and Woodward, 2014).

Despite their differences and varied forms of expression, I would argue that military memoirs collectively remain interesting as narratives of embodied experiences. They are more often than not narrated through what Yuval Harari, a military historian and authority on military memoirs, calls 'flesh witnessing'. This term he borrows and develops from a French World War 1 soldier who wrote that 'the man "who has not understood *with his flesh* cannot talk to you about it"' (Harari, 2009: 215) ¹. The claim here is that war is something that must be experienced through and with the flesh. While the 'you' referred to in the French soldier's quote is somewhat unclear, if his words are meant in the literal sense, its critique is so damning that most of war scholarship is wasted before it has even begun.

However, to me the quote, rather than making a dismissive statement about who can speak about war, more importantly captures a reoccurring theme of wartime literature, namely the challenge of communicating what was/is felt and lived through. Tim O'Brien seems to suggest in *The Things They Carried* (1991) that war 'transcends communicability' (Scranton, 2015). It is experienced by those who practice it as a bracketed space, one in which only a few have access to, at once a manifestation of life at its most real, and its direct counterpart. This necessarily makes communicating wartime experience a complex, gruelling and sometimes even quasi-mystical endeavour. The notion of 'flesh-witnessing' implies therefore a schism between the 'author' and the 'reader' that is seemingly insurmountable.

However, I want to suggest that there might be more productive ways to think about the relationship between the author and the reader here. In what follows, I engage critically with the concept of 'flesh witnessing' and explore how it both reveals and obscures in my reading of military memoirs. I wish to question how this concept can close off rather than open lines of communication between the 'out there' and the 'back home'. I do not dismiss the

¹ Myself, and likely others who draw on Harari's work (Woodward and Jenkins, 2012b; Duncanson, 2013; Woodward and Jenkins, 2013) owe him a depth of gratitude for the concept of 'flesh witnessing'. My treatment of this concept here is with the intention to develop it further, rather than be a dismissal of its usefulness.

genuinely felt obstacles associated with this on the part of the author, nor do I suggest that all of these can easily, or ever, be fully overcome. Rather, this article offers a reflection on the process through which attempts can be made to bridge this schism on the part of the reader as a reader. Instead of treating the author and the reader as disparate entities, and embodiment as a concept that can be employed only to understand the lived experiences of militarised bodies as they appear in military memoirs, I want to suggest that taking embodiment seriously requires an engagement with *our own* embodiment as scholars of militarisation, war and violence. This means that embodiment should not be reduced to a concept that is assigned or allocated elsewhere, but one that requires acknowledgement within us.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, I unpack the notion of ‘flesh witnessing’. Recognising that military memoirs are embodied texts, I discuss the challenge of communication and how this is discussed within memoirs. This can be crudely summarised in a much repeated phrase ‘you don’t know what its like’ – a phrase that has haunted my work with these memoirs throughout. However, I suggest that there is a logical follow on to that phrase – ‘but I’m going to try to tell you anyway’. I insist that something productive happens in the *telling and the listening to* these stories that I wish to retain, something that is left out if we only pay attention to the first part of this phrase.

The second section begins with Thomas Nagel’s (1974) famous question *What is it like for a bat to be a bat?* In this piece, Nagel reflects on the challenges humans face in understanding what it is like for a bat to be a bat as our realm of experience is so dramatically different from that of a bat. I posit that by treating embodiment and experience as concepts that close off rather than open lines of communication, war scholarship is in danger of becoming to military memoirs and war stories what humans are to bats. Building on James Mensch’s work on embodiment, I argue that is not a concept that necessarily shuts down communication between various embodied selves, such as the author and the reader of military memoirs, but rather that there is something productive to be said about the movement *between and through* these embodied selves. Its various ‘entanglements’ (Mensch, 2009) speak to connectivity rather than compartmentalisation, participation rather than partition and attachment rather than detachment. Challenging this has consequences for scholarship as a shift in the conception of embodiment can invite alternative methods for reading and writing the embodiment and experience of war – one that does not allow for war and militarisation to be treated as phenomenon outside of our embodied selves as scholars of war and militarism. The

final part of the article unearths a number of my hitherto unacknowledged methods to ‘get inside’ and to challenge the schism ‘flesh witnessing’ can create.

Recognising that military memoirs are embodied texts means that scholars necessarily have to approach them as subjective accounts. However, military memoirs are more than mere individual testaments or stories of war – these texts participate in the *writing of war*. They help frame what we think war is. Interrogating them as extracts of a wider writing of war means also asking which embodied experiences become important and what work the embodied framing the ‘here’ and ‘over there’ does to our conceptualisations of war. Through analysing the various embodied assemblages that wars enable, here done primarily through paying attention to the author and the reader, we can also begin to ask broader questions about who’s embodied experience is written into war and who’s bodies count.

Writing the Flesh

Military memoirs have the ability to ‘inform accounts of armed conflict both as reports of lived experience and as socially situated records which go on to shape wider public imaginations’ (Woodward and Jenkins, 2012a: 120). Their first-person narrative grants the authors at once a privileged form of knowledge as a ‘factual record’ whilst also being a partial and situated testimony of a personal experience (Woodward and Jenkins, 2012b: 496). In addition to being ‘testaments of war’ (Hynes, 1998) they are also *narratives of embodied experiences*. These embodiments are at once individually and collectively expressed *through* and *between* bodies within these texts, and capture an assemblage of emotions within the whole spectrum of pleasure and pain. Take for example how Brandon Friedman, author of *The war I always wanted* and a Lieutenant in the 101 Airborne Division of the US Army writes about *Operation Anaconda*.

‘My adrenaline valve was jammed in the open position, blessing me with a pleasant, low-level euphoria. I coupled that with extreme terror and uncertainty and called it even. I became eerily calm. On account of the odd combination of external stimuli, all the fear I felt earlier had mysteriously dissipated. I was no longer concerned with my apprehension and only mildly aware of the physical discomfort. Everything felt totally natural. The booms, thuds, and crashes were getting closer with every step but it didn't seem to matter anymore. There was a strange sense of *déjà vu* – like I'd always been there. Somehow I managed to stay focused on the guys in the platoon and how they were holding up too. In fact, I can't recall a time when I felt *more* focused on the things

going on around me. And yet, I still felt completely at ease – as if the years of Army training had worked. It was like being pulled in opposite directions by two very different drugs – one a simulant, one a downer. My senses were being expanded beyond the normal human range’ (Friedman, 2007: 64-65 emphasis in original).

Or, as in *The Heart and the Fist*, where Eric Greitens talks about preparing for war through his ‘Hell Week’ in the Navy SEALs,

‘As we crawled, soaking wet, we became covered in sand. The skin on our elbows and knees grated, and just when we reached the instructor who had blown one whistle, another whistle would sound – two blasts – thirty yards away and we would begin to crawl again. “Only five more days! You guys tired yet? You cold? You haven’t even started!”’ (Greitens, 2012: 173-174).

Harari argues that military memoirs, at least from the 18th Century onwards are characterised by a conception of ‘war as revelation’ (Harari, 2008). The experience of war, or more precisely combat, is explained as a ‘quasi-mystical’ thing, often likened to a (re)birth, a religious conversion or an epiphany (Harari, 2008: 1-2). War is seen to reveal some deep truth, one that can only be captured through the ‘extreme bodily condition of war’ (Harari, 2008: 7). This shift carries within it a recognition of war as a ‘radically embodying event’ (Scarry, 1985; McSorley, 2014), one which transcends ‘normal’ human modes of expression. When this is the case, how can these experiences be translated into the written word and what are the politics of communicating these experiences?

In his work, Harari argues that communication is not only impossible, but also, in part resisted by authors.

‘In order to establish their authority as flesh-witnesses, late modern veterans first have to create the idea of flesh-witnessing in the minds of their audience. This is done by repeating two basic formulas when describing extreme war experiences: “It is impossible to describe it” and “Those who were not there cannot understand it.”’ (Harari, 2008: 7; see also Harari, 2009).

Such a sentiment is expressed by Adrian Bonenberger, a Captain of the 10th Mountain division of the US Army,

‘I feel like I can’t communicate with anyone who wasn’t over here. I can say things – I know all the correct things to say to make people feel comfortable, but the truth is that – a truth – if you’ve never had to keep going forward into the thickening battle, if you’ve never hunted and been hunted in turn, if you’ve never felt so terrified that you couldn’t move, if you’ve never snapped and charged headlong toward the enemy, not caring whether you died or not, you don’t know what its like to live the life of the warrior, to live on the razor’s edge’ (Bonenberger, 2014: 314).

Bonenberger is right. Most people, least of all myself, do not immediately know what it's like to 'live the life of the warrior' or to 'live on the razor's edge'. I don't know because I, in his words, 'wasn't over there'.

For Harari, 'flesh-witness narratives only *seem* to be interested in conveying experiences as, by definition, they cannot succeed in this. Their basic assumption is that experience cannot be translated into facts and words and cannot be conveyed to people who have not undergone the experience themselves' (2009: 221-222). Literary scholar Kate McLoughlin argues that while war might 'resists depiction' in various ways (McLoughlin, 2011: 6), it is nevertheless written about repeatedly in order

'to impose discursive order on the chaos of conflict and so to render it more comprehensible; to keep the record for the self and others; to give some meaning to mass death; to memorialise; to inform civilians of the nature of battle so as to facilitate the reintegration of veterans into peacetime society; to provide cathartic relief; to warn; and even, through the warning, to promote peace' (McLoughlin, 2011: 7).

These are reasons that leave open the possibility of communication, and for something productive and potentially progressive to come out of writing about wartime experiences. These are also all reasons that allocate a different kind of responsibility for both the author and the reader, to communicate, endeavor to understand, and potentially to change. Joseph Siegel, an Army veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, feels deeply the challenges this holds.

'It wasn't for lack of trying. I got up every day after Annie went to work and tried to make sense of what happened over there, how it all fit together, why it counted for so much if I wasn't even sure how to add it all up. I sat at my computer staring at the same words – the plain words, the gruesome words, the sentimental words, words that belonged only here, had no claim to that, no purchase on the ground over there. I couldn't write the things that haunted me for fear of dishonesty and cheap manipulation, which I blamed on not being haunted enough. How much blood did I need to justify spilling it on the page? (Scranton and Gallagher, 2013: 10).

To my mind Harari's claim confuses the difficulty to express experience in the written word with a willingness, urge and even compulsion to do so. To, in Siegel's words 'try to make sense of how it all fit together' and to connect the 'over there' and 'then' to the 'here' and 'now'. Stating that something is impossible to describe is not quite the same as saying that you will not try, or that 'I am not trying'. If we accept this difference, there is nothing necessarily unique about wartime or combat experiences as opposed to other experiences. We all no doubt have embodied experiences and emotions that feel so spatially and temporally

bound that they seem to belong only there, in that place, at that time. They can feel near impossible to convey in language as the written word can only get us so far.

Further, recognising that the problems of communication and translation are genuinely felt does not exclude interrogating our interpretation of that sense, nor what it does to war scholarship or politics. Harari suggests that academic scholars prefer ‘eye-witnesses’, who deal with ‘observable facts’, to ‘flesh-witnesses’ (Harari, 2009). This is because modern western academia as he knows it negates sensory regimes and sensations as a part of their knowledge production².

‘The basic problem that scholars have with flesh-witnesses is the latter’s challenge not merely to the authority of the eyewitnesses that provide scholars with so much information, and not merely to the authority of the scholars personally. Rather, flesh-witnesses challenge the academic way of learning and conveying knowledge. One can always overrule the challenge presented by flesh-witnesses, and transform them into an object of academic study. Yet doing so is a power struggle that requires us to take the sting out of the flesh-witness and, in effect, transform the threatening flesh-witness into a docile and manageable eyewitness’ (Harari, 2009: 225).

For him, scholarly accounts of war and ‘flesh witness’ accounts are ‘rival authorities’ (Harari, 2009). However, the more pressing concern here relates to how one might avoid ‘transforming’ ‘flesh witness’ accounts into ‘an object of academic study’ in the sense he suggests, and perhaps challenge how we might approach these accounts. While it is true that large parts of academic scholarship avoids granting emotions, senses and embodiment, all crucial components of ‘flesh-witnesses’ any real purchase, this is not the case in all of scholarship.

Feminists have for decades sought to place the body, emotion and ‘situated knowledge’ as central to their analysis of social, cultural and political worlds and phenomena. Helene Cixous (1976), Donna Haraway (1988), Elizabeth Grosz (1994), Moira Gatens (1996), Susan Bordo (2003), Iris Marion Young (2005) and Judith Butler (1993) (to name a few) have in their own ways tackled the sticky web of the mind/body distinction. Traditions within sociology, anthropology and philosophy also exist that take embodiment as a crucial component of social and political life, and integrate this into knowledge production (see among others Mauss, 1973; De Certeau, 2011; Scarry, 1985; Cowan, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; McSorley, 2014). When working within feminist scholarship and traditions that take

² To illustrate this, Harari aptly points to how in conferences on war and genocide, participants still expect to be provided with plenty of refreshments, comfortable chairs and well-air-conditioned rooms (Harari, 2009: 225).

embodiment seriously, it does not have to be surprising or off-putting that other peoples lived experiences as gendered, sexed and racialized beings are not immediately accessible beyond the living bodies in which they reside. Such is the nature of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1988).

If this is the case, what does this mean for how we might conceptualise the notion of ‘experience’ itself? For Harari, flesh-witnesses stand opposed to postmodernist epistemologies because ‘flesh-witnessing is the exact opposite of this postmodernist idea of cultural construction’ as ‘war experiences reveal the truth precisely by blowing apart cultural constructions’ (Harari, 2008: 20). The historian and gender scholar Joan W. Scott raises some important methodological and epistemological concerns against relying on ‘experience’ in scholarship. She argues that studies that rely on experience as evidence are in danger of ‘taking as self-evident the identity of those experiencing’ (Scott, 1992: 25). This means that

‘questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured about language (or discourse) and history are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes *evidence for the fact of difference*, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world’ (Scott, 1991: 777 emphasis added).

Quite contrary to how Harari sees ‘flesh-witnessing’ as something *set apart* from construction and performance, Scott reminds us that it is through discourse that we make sense of and communicate our embodied experiences, regardless of what those experiences are. Military memoirs should be read bearing in mind that ‘experiences are always mediated through discourse’ and that the *meaning* we all give to our actions are ‘continuously constructed within a web of different discourses’ (Stern, 2006: 185). Military memoirs, rather than being mere testaments to experiences of war, should, I suggest, instead be thought of as a part of the *writing of wartime bodies*. They should be treated as ‘meaning-constructing activities, instead of meaning-preserving ones’ (Stern, 2006: 184). These memoirs participate in ‘truth-making’ – individually through telling their story of the war, and collectively by influencing ours. Recognising this, war scholarship should be open to the possibility that something productive happens in the *telling* and the *listening to* these stories. A telling and listening that recognises the fluidity between stories and lives, at times themselves accounted for in memoirs, and emphasises their connectivity. In the following section I explore how a reconceptualization of embodiment might enable such a move.

Bats and Bodies, Authors and Readers

The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously asked the question ‘what is it like for a bat to be a bat?’ He makes the following epistemological reflections around what beginning to answer this question might entail.

‘Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one’s arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one’s mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one’s feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat’ (Nagel, 1974: 439).

Of course, no human knows what it’s like for a bat to be a bat. Another bat might come close, as common experiences feed imagination and ability to understand, but a human being cannot know what it’s like to be *that* bat. Such is the nature of the ‘bat to human condition’, but such is not necessarily the nature of the ‘human to human condition’. Nor is this the nature of the ‘military’ to the ‘civilian’ condition.

Embodiment as a term captures a recognition that humans access the world through their bodies because we are always bounded in space and time (Richardson and Locks, 2014: ix). That as bounded creatures we approach the world, make our mark upon it and react to it from the spatial and temporal axis we happen to inhabit. So far, this does not really challenge the notion of ‘flesh witnessing’ just discussed, which fundamentally recognizes this. However, this is not all there is to embodiment.

The philosopher James Mensch argues that taking embodiment seriously means accepting that it affects the totality of our understanding (Mensch, 2009). He understands the concept of embodiment as composed of two crucial recognitions. Firstly, that to be embodied is to be *physically situated* in the world (Mensch, 2009: 5). This is a position of exclusion that emphasizes that we are all individually and uniquely thrust upon the world, a condition that persists through our lifespans and from which we can never escape. However, and this is the crucial point, as embodied beings we are also dependent on the world and ‘our need for the world is also a *need for one another*’ (Mensch, 2009: 5).

‘Our embodied nature is such that we can neither be nor be conceivably without one another. As Aristotle expressed this, a single individual “may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts”. Apart from the board and the other pieces, the piece has no sense. This does not mean that humans in their interdependence are identical to one another; like the pieces on the board, their very positionality as stemming from their embodiment prevents this’ (Mensch, 2009: 5).

In understanding embodiment in this way we can, I believe, begin to challenge the chasm that military memoirs can construct between the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’, between the ‘over there’ and the ‘here’.

Mensch develops the concept of embodiment in a direction that emphasizes its numerous ‘entanglements’ (Mensch, 2009). Elaborating on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘intertwining’, he explores the phenomenological recognition that embodiment demands a particular perspective, requiring some elements to remain hidden. This is because ‘what I see, the visible as such, is structured by this necessity. It must contain the apparent and the hidden’ (Mensch, 2009: 19).

For example, if I look at a chair, that act is dependent upon my embodied eyes seeing that chair, and that I am situated in a position to see it. However, ‘what is less obvious is that the division between the two underpins my ability to question or even have an intentional relation to the world. Without the hidden, my questioning cannot begin’ (Mensch, 2009: 19). To accept these two elements entails accepting that the ‘seeing’ is dependent on embodiment. Relating this to the work of Haraway, she, through the metaphor of vision, and actively resisting a (traditionally understood) conception of objectivity, famously advocated that it is rather by necessity located, partial and embodied. Recognising this means that location becomes about vulnerability and a resistance to the politics of closure (Haraway, 1988: 590). My embodiment enables me to take a step to the side and see something from a different perspective. In this sense, the relationship between my embodiment and the chair, not unlike the bat and myself, is one that is flexible, mobile, and intertwined on my part. If these entanglements, along with a recognition of the importance of the hidden to the ability to question is characteristic of myself and two objects of study which have no meaningful way of communicating with me (bats and chairs), how much more entangled must not my own embodiment be with those who seek to actively communicate with me?

Retrospective Embodied Methods

Contrary to someone who might have conducted extensive fieldwork in a place and thereby embodied similar spaces to their research subjects, as a reader of military memoirs I am not privy to these spaces. Nor am I privy to that space that can be created through conducting face-to-face interviews about these experiences retrospectively. I am an embodied self ‘in absentia’ from what Lefebvre calls *spaces of representation* or *lived space* – the spaces that ‘produces specific forms of cognitive and corporeal knowing which are the outcome of spatial practices’ (Hockey, 2009: 481). Because I cannot do much to alter that fact, the texts themselves, or the authors’ behind them, insisting on the potentials for a more open notion of ‘flesh-witnessing’ can only stem from how I approach these texts. In what follows, I outline a number of practices I have found myself unconsciously doing whilst reading, which I suggest can form an embodied method of reading. Working with these practices as a form of method rather than something I ‘just do’, has enabled me to think of my field as the military memoirs, my participants as the texts themselves and myself as a participant observer of these texts³.

Because of the distance in time and space between the author and myself, not to mention the challenge posed by the oft-repeated phrase ‘you don’t understand because you weren’t there’, I have come to realise that in my reading of these texts I rely on what Antonius Robben calls ‘ethnographic imagination’. A ‘leap of analytic and interpretive faith’ that is necessary when writing about places where you cannot go, or where one might not dare to go (Robben, 2011: 3). Learning to think consciously about this, I noticed that I do several things while reading. I read out loud. I mimic. I stage. I perform.

With a ‘leap of faith’ I employ what I think I already know about wars, gender, the military and militarisation to quite literally try to *imagine* myself in the author’s boots. At times I can also be a fly on the wall in conversations, or a participant of events. I find myself to have continuous and lengthy imagined conversations with the authors. I inquire about this or that incident, the choice of wording and whether they would phrase it differently today. I ask things like ‘was it really that hot?’ or ‘how did that make you feel?’ and I say things like ‘You sound really angry about that’ or ‘I don’t understand that’. They might answer things like ‘hell yeah it was hot’, ‘I was really upset when that happened’ and ‘I was not really angry, more disappointed’ and, inevitably, ‘You wouldn’t understand it, you weren’t there’. I

³ I am grateful to Lauren Greenwood for pointing this out.

picture us having these conversations in their living rooms, in offices or on a bench in a park, both sceptical, both wary, both uneasy. These imagined conversations shift the relationship between my research subjects and myself to one akin to a conversation. While my questions ultimately necessarily go unanswered, speaking them out loud as if I was having a conversation forces me to clarify what I mean, why I'm asking it and reflect on what I expect the answer to be and why.

Another thing I do is read out loud. I accentuate phrases and listen to the clues in the text that tell me whether the speaking subjects are shouting, whispering or giggling. If I know where the author is from I try to sound like them when I perform their lines, switching between other accents in a dialogue. When the memoirs describe facial expressions, I find myself mimicking these. Looking surprised, raising an eyebrow, holding my hand to my ears, clutching something. I point when this is instructed, shrug, laugh, snort, and gesture with the author. At times my office can become a stage. If I have trouble understanding the scenery and terrain described, chairs, pencils, staplers, and books can become props or indicators of people, houses or mountains as I try to map out the space described. Much like an actor reading a script, I perform lines on a stage of my own making. Through seeing and hearing their words spoken out loud, through touching and movement I try to capture meaning and intent in the texts. I use voice, gestures, and placements to help me 'get inside'.

Beginning to think about these actions as productive methods rather than me simply trying to accommodate my own anxieties about the 'you don't know what it's like' has made me more attentive to ways in which the texts themselves offer clues and openings. Reading these actively, playing out scenes or simply speaking out loud forces me to recall the logical second half of the phrase 'you don't know what it's like', namely 'but I'm going to try to tell you anyway'. So I try to listen, with my whole body.

A more painful part of my method, relates less to reading and more to writing and how my words might be received. I picture the authors of these memoirs picking up one of my texts, written about them, without them knowing. I used to have nightmares about this. About what they would think, how I must inevitably have misread them, how they might immediately dismiss what I am writing because 'I wasn't there' and 'I don't know what it's like'. This is the most dangerous of all my methods because it taps into the sense of insecurity likely many others and I have about their own work. Is it good enough? Am I right when I say this? Have I misunderstood? Is my anxiety getting in the way of me daring to be critical?

However, this most dangerous of methods, this most uncomfortable of imaginations, this most threatening of anxieties is also the most fruitful. It means that I have to think of these authors as my audience as well as other academics and students. With time this sense has eased to make room for a more productive realisation. A recognition that despite a distance in time and space, my reading and writing about these memoirs have an unknowing and perhaps reluctant co-author. That I am not, however much I might wish to be, or however much the authors might push me away, detached and disparate from these texts. Nor are they detached from the texts that I produce about them. We are already ‘entangled’. Similar to how Susanna Hast writes about her song writing and performances as ‘a dance with other people’, I too, ‘dance at a safe distance’, but where I still ‘try to follow their rhythm, the pulse of their lives’ (Hast, this issue). This rests on a deeper recognition that ‘not only am I within this world, but the fact that I am an embodied perceiver positions this world within me. It comes to presence through my senses. My embodied being, my flesh, provides the dimensions of its appearing’ (Mensch, 2009: 7).

Critical war studies teaches us that war is ‘generative’ and that ‘we cannot take for granted the identities of the entities which engage in it, nor define its geographic and temporal scope solely in terms of sovereign territorial states and their battle casualties’ (Barkawi, 2011: 710; see also Brighton, 2011; Sylvester, 2012). A recognition of this should also compel us to see how war, and in my case how embodied selves and stories *write war*, can be unpacked through exploring the connectivity between these bodies, lives, and stories. The alternative conception of the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’ of military memoirs that I have illustrated here can invite a different form of war scholarship, one that pays attention to the assemblages of wartime bodies and does not shy away from reflecting on the researchers own embodiment in this process in an effort to trouble the spatial and temporal axis they can often construct. Returning to the metaphor of Nagel’s bats, we should aspire to develop principles of scholarship that resist treating narratives of human experiences as detached and disembodied from one another. As Nagel argues, ‘if the subjective character of experience is fully comprehensible only from one point of view, then a shift to greater objectivity – that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint – does not take us nearer to the nature of the phenomenon: it takes us further from it’ (Nagel, 1974: 445).

Studying ‘war as experience’ (Sylvester, 2013) requires methods that do not shy away from the embodied self of the scholar, but allows this to guide, challenge and push the directions

our research takes us in. If we believe that embodied experiences of war are crucial in understanding what war is in the sense that ‘stories and memoirs make people; they make war’ (Hast, this issue), this necessitates an epistemological and methodological stance that enables these experiences to have real purchase on how we read and write about war.

As critical military scholars we should question the politics of the radical dislocation: “‘I’ (body) was “over there” (specific geographical space) and “you” (body) were not”⁴. This questioning not only has effects on the relationship between the author and the reader, as discussed throughout, but also on how war is conceptualised more broadly. That logic features at the most two embodied selves – that of the author and that of the reader – leaving other subjects largely outside of the narrative. Other bodies and experiences, especially those, whether civilian or combatant that have their origin in the ‘over there’ space often remain peripheral and largely absent. They are often no more than props in the narrative, distant and fleeting bodies that are only rarely given the opportunity to peek through the stage curtains. Reading military memoirs differently and troubling these geopolitical logics can offer an opportunity to explore war’s numerous embodied ‘entanglements’ (Mensch, 2009), not just between the reader and the author, but between all the embodied selves that appear within it. This in turn offers an opportunity to analyse *how* certain subjects are constituted ‘as different’ (Scott, 1991), enabling critical scholarship to reach beyond seeking mere understanding of wartime experiences, but to question the politics of the narration of experience and how it feeds into our broader spatial and temporal conceptions of war.

This Special Issue has offered me a chance to turn my scholarly, personal, ‘civilian’ and no doubt gendered unconscious embodiment into something productive⁵. This article represents an attempt to open up a conversation between my embodied self and the texts I study in an effort to reflect around the challenges of reading and writing embodiment and critically engaging with how military memoirs can be read and written about differently. I am under no illusion that what I have sketched out above in my retrospective methods solves all (or any) of the challenges discussed throughout this piece. And I certainly would not argue that these methods could replace ethnography, participant observation, surveys, data analysis or literary methodologies. Rather, I have sought to open up a space to think creatively about how we use the concept of embodiment through challenging the relationship between the author and the

⁴ I am grateful to Shane Brighton for suggesting this phrasing.

⁵ I am grateful to Victoria Basham for encouraging me to do so.

reader of military memoirs, through insisting on the 'entanglements' of embodiment (Mensch, 2009). My own embodied methods in working with these memoirs represents an attempt to develop *methods for reading and writing embodiment*.

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